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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 51/195 B of 17 December 1996, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-second session on the progress made in the implementation of that resolution. In the same resolution, the Assembly had also requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). Three progress reports were submitted: the first on 16 March 1997 (A/51/838-S/1997/240 and Corr.1), the second on 16 June 1997 (A/51/929-S/1997/482) and the third on 17 September 1997 (A/52/358-S/1997/719).

2. The present report is also intended to fulfil the request of the Security Council, in resolution 1076 (1996) of 22 October 1996, to be kept regularly informed of the main developments in Afghanistan. The report describes the main events which have taken place in Afghanistan since the adoption of resolution 51/195 B, including the major military and political developments and the activities of the Special Mission. It also draws attention to activities in New York, including the appointment of a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and the convening of the third meeting of countries with influence in Afghanistan.

3. In October 1997, Norbert Heinrich Holl, Head of UNSMA, expressed to me his intention to resign at the end of 1997, when his contract expires. I accepted his resignation with deep regret. I should like to express my gratitude to Mr. Holl, who has worked devotedly since July 1996 under extremely difficult circumstances and during a period of great upheaval in Afghanistan to promote national reconciliation and a durable political settlement in that country.

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II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Military situation

4. The military balance between the Afghan warring factions see-sawed wildly in 1997. The factions fought hard for control of northern Afghanistan and the northern approaches to Kabul. However, despite the expenditure of large quantities of externally supplied ammunition and equipment, and the loss of many lives and the displacement of civilian populations, neither side succeeded in recording sizeable gains of territory or significant political advantage. By early November 1997, the predominantly Pushtun Taliban continued to hold approximately two thirds of the country but had not been able to capture the territories in the north, which are largely populated by the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnic groups.

5. The Afghan antagonists were the Taliban and the five-party Northern Alliance which is formally known as the Islamic and National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. The Taliban continued to control most provinces in the south, south-west and south-east, including Kabul and the cities of Kandahar, Herat and Jalalabad. The Northern Alliance, which operated from the provincial capitals of Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamyan, Taloqan and Maimana, was in control of the provinces in northern and central Afghanistan. The Alliance at present comprises the Jamiat-i-Islami, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and his chief military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud; the Hezb-i-Wahdat led by Karim Khalili; the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIMA), led by General Rashid Dostum and General Abdul Malik; the Harakat-i-Islami, led by Sheik Asef Mohseini; and the breakaway faction of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, led by Mohammed Akbari.

6. In January 1997, the Taliban launched a large-scale offensive against the Northern Alliance, sweeping through most of the positions held to the north of Kabul by the Alliance. The strategic positions which fell to the Taliban included Bagram airbase and Charikar, the provincial capital of Parwan, as well as Jabal-os-Saraj and Gulbahar. The Taliban also advanced along the Ghorband valley towards the central province of Bamyan and, on 2 February, occupied Sheik Ali in Parwan province, 20 kilometres east of Shebar pass which commands access to Bamyan and to the northern territories controlled by General Dostum.

7. The Northern Alliance was dealt a further blow on 19 May when General Malik, a key NIMA commander, staged what at the time appeared to be a pro-Taliban revolt against General Dostum. General Malik took control of Mazar-i-Sharif on 24 May, forcing General Dostum to flee the country and take refuge in Turkey. Seizing the opportunity, the Taliban forces, estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000, infiltrated areas north of the Hindu Kush for the first time. Some 3,000 troops proceeded to Mazar, and others went to Kunduz and Takhar provinces. A Taliban delegation, led by Mullah Mohammad Ghaus, flew into Mazar-i-Sharif on 27 May for talks with General Malik.

8. The situation changed on 27 May when General Malik, apparently alarmed by the Taliban's rush to disarm his troops and those of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, decided to change sides again and to attack the Taliban forces. The Taliban forces, outnumbered and outgunned in a place far from their own sphere of influence, withdrew from Mazar on 28 May after suffering serious losses. Capitalizing on

the Taliban's setback, Commander Massoud broke out of the Panjsher valley and cut off the northern side of the Salang tunnel on 28 May. The Massoud forces retook Gulbahar and Jabal-os-Sijaji, located at the southern end of the Salang pass, effectively trapping an estimated 2,000 Taliban forces north of the Hindu Kush. In July, Massoud's forces recaptured Charikar and Bagram airbase, north of Kabul. The forces eventually reached to within 20 to 25 kilometres north of Kabul, putting the capital within range of artillery and rocket fire for the first time since the autumn of 1996. During the fighting in July and August, Kabul came under fire frequently from rocket, artillery and aerial bombing attacks which killed and injured a number of civilians.

9. Severe fighting broke out again in September when the Taliban, supported by defections of local Pushtun commanders, renewed their attempt to take Mazar-i-Sharif. However, like their first attempt in May, the Taliban's initial gains were wiped out by counter-attacks and defections from the Taliban side. Both military and civilian casualties were high, with an estimated 2,000 Taliban troops either killed or captured since May. In the fighting east of Mazar, both sides overran a refugee camp of some 7,000 displaced Tajik nationals, causing several deaths and injuries and creating a situation of near panic among the refugees. Fighting continued for control of the northern city of Kunduz, which has been in the hands of the Taliban or pro-Taliban independent commanders since May 1997.

10. In the central region, sporadic fighting continued between the Taliban and Hezb-i-Wahdat faction. Taliban aircraft attacked Bamyan several times in July and August. In this connection, I should like to draw the special attention of the international community to the fact that the continued fighting in Afghanistan has had devastating effects not only on its people but also on its vast reservoir of rich cultural heritage. A case in point was the recent incident in which a bomb blast near the larger of the two great Buddha statues in Bamyan caused some damage to the head of the statue.

11. In the west, fighting occurred in the Morghab river area in Badghis province but with little change in frontline positions. The Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad regions were generally calm.

B. Political situation

12. As the fighting continued, the political situation in Afghanistan remained deadlocked. The deepening division of the country along ethnic lines, reinforced by external military and political support, continued to inhibit efforts to engender political dialogue among the factions. Throughout 1997, neither the Taliban nor its rivals appear to have given serious consideration to a political, as opposed to a military, solution to the conflict.

13. An unsettled leadership problem within the Northern Alliance also affected the political environment. Infighting was most pronounced in the predominantly Uzbek Jumbish movement, whose leader, General Dostum, was forced into exile in Turkey for four months by his rival, General Malik, after the latter's short-lived defection to the Taliban in May. While General Malik subsequently turned against the Taliban and helped to drive its forces out of Mazar, the return of

General Dostum to Afghanistan on 12 September led to further political uncertainty in the north. Adding to the complex leadership problem was the death of newly designated Prime Minister Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai in an aircraft accident at Bamyan airport in August.

14. The humanitarian and political activities of the United Nations in the Mazar-i-Sharif area were seriously disrupted by the renewed fighting and subsequent chaos, including explicit threats to United Nations personnel and the repeated looting of United Nations offices and equipment. At one point, some Afghan officials in Mazar falsely accused United Nations personnel of collaborating with the Taliban in directing its aerial attacks on the city and threatened them with retribution. Looted (and repainted) United Nations vehicles are brazenly used by local factions. I am extremely concerned by all of this, as well as by the refusal of General Malik to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the Taliban prisoners captured in May, a state of affairs that, as he has been informed on many occasions, is completely unacceptable to the United Nations and the international community at large.

15. Of similar concern is the Taliban's refusal to start negotiations with the Northern Alliance as a whole without preconditions, as well as its social and administrative practices. The mistreatment of girls and women, such as the denial of their rights to employment, health care and education, is especially worrying. Furthermore, Afghanistan has become the world's largest producer of heroin, with the vast majority of the poppies used for that purpose cultivated in areas controlled by the Taliban. The United Nations International Drug Control Programme recently announced that the Taliban had agreed to work out ways and means to eliminate poppy cultivation. I sincerely hope that the Taliban will ensure that the agreement is implemented faithfully and effectively.

16. The Taliban have made new efforts during 1997 to gain international recognition and support. Taliban representatives undertook a series of missions abroad, in particular to East Asia, the Gulf region and the United States of America. While the Governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan in May, other Governments have withheld their decision to extend de jure recognition.

17. Member States, in particular the countries surrounding Afghanistan, continue to express concern and frustration about the continuing civil war. Of particular concern to them are the negative implications of prolonged warfare and the imposition of an ultra-orthodox Islamic State on their borders. Meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey were held in the Islamic Republic of Iran in early January, followed by a meeting of the Afghan parties on 25 and 26 January. The Taliban, however, refused to attend the meeting in Tehran. The Defence Ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan met in Tashkent on 24 and 25 February and reaffirmed their commitment jointly to defend their borders. The Governments of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran made efforts throughout the year to promote a negotiated settlement to the conflict through an intra-Afghan dialogue. None of those efforts, however, was

successful in getting talks started, in large part because the two countries were not seen by one or the other of the Afghan factions as impartial mediators.

18. Foreign military support to the two sides continued unabated throughout 1997. Reliable eyewitnesses reported many sorties of military deliveries in unmarked aircraft to bases of the Northern Alliance, as well as numerous deliveries by truck caravans of arms, ammunition and fuel to Taliban-controlled territory. United Nations employees also reported an encounter with an unidentified foreign military training unit of several hundred persons near Kabul. Such blatant violations of General Assembly and Security Council resolutions which call for a halt to foreign military intervention seriously undermine United Nations peacemaking efforts and serve to prolong the Afghan conflict. They also raised suspicions and worsened relations among the countries in the region.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

19. Despite the unfavourable climate for negotiations during most of 1997, UNSMA has persisted in its peacemaking efforts. From 13 to 15 January, the Head of UNSMA convened an intra-Afghan working group in Islamabad by inviting representatives of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance to participate. The group discussed the modalities for establishing a ceasefire, an exchange of prisoners and steps towards a more durable peace. The working group met again in Islamabad, from 24 to 26 February, to exchange views in greater depth on those subjects and to review more detailed proposals for confidence-building measures and a draft ceasefire agreement. The participants agreed to refer those issues for decision at a higher level meeting. However, owing to the posing of numerous preconditions, the faction leaders were unable to reach agreement on a formula for holding direct talks.

20. Despite the setback to this initiative, UNSMA continued to maintain contact with all of the Afghan factions and to press them once again to define their terms for negotiation. By early May, however, fighting had escalated once more in central and western Afghanistan, spreading to the Northern Alliance stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif. The Mission continued to exploit new opportunities for negotiation during relative lulls in the fighting in June and early July. Following the capture of several high-ranking Taliban officials and a large number of troops in northern Afghanistan in late May, the Head of UNSMA again initiated efforts to convene a meeting at a neutral site outside Afghanistan, with a single representative from each of the two opposing groups. Taliban representatives, however, refused to agree to any talks until their leaders and all of their prisoners were released, a condition unacceptable to the Northern Alliance which set its own precondition, the demilitarization of Kabul.

21. While both sides agreed in principle on the necessity of a negotiated settlement, neither would agree to unconditional talks. The two sides also continued the familiar practice of accusing each other of receiving military support from foreign countries, while categorically denying their own responsibilities for accepting external support. During a second round of meetings with the Head of UNSMA, the Northern Alliance dropped its insistence on

the prior demilitarization of Kabul, but the Taliban refused to drop its insistence on the prior release of its prisoners captured by the Alliance. As military operations escalated in the northern region during September and October, it was once again clear that both sides preferred to pursue an elusive military "victory" over their adversaries.

22. Throughout 1997, UNSMA remained in close touch with officials and diplomats in Islamabad, notably the envoys of the group of 21 countries with influence in Afghanistan and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The Head of UNSMA also travelled within the region and beyond to exchange views with a wide range of governmental officials and other parties interested in Afghanistan. From 21 to 26 January, he held consultations on the Afghan situation in Tashkent, Ashkabad and Tehran with the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and with Iranian leaders. He held further talks from 18 to 27 June with officials in Tashkent, Moscow, Washington, D.C., Paris, Bonn and Rome. In Rome, he also consulted former King Zahir Shah and his aides. In meetings with Pakistani officials in Islamabad, the Head of UNSMA stressed that national reconciliation and a durable political settlement could only be achieved with the support and cooperation of the neighbouring States and the major powers.

23. Peace in Afghanistan, if it is to be a durable peace, must also be founded on the alleviation of the Afghan people's most pressing social and economic problems. It is for this reason that the United Nations system, including the Bretton Woods institutions, is currently formulating a strategic framework for Afghanistan, an initiative which is referred in the report of the Secretary-General on emergency assistance to Afghanistan (A/52/536). The strategic framework for Afghanistan proposes a more holistic approach by the international community, whereby the political efforts of the United Nations inform, and are informed by, the international community's social, economic and humanitarian priorities. In this connection, I look forward to a greater degree of integration of the activities of UNSMA and the other United Nations agencies and programmes working for the Afghan people.

IV. ACTIVITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

A. Appointment of the Special Envoy

24. In July 1997, I decided to appoint Lakhdar Brahimi, former Foreign Minister of Algeria, as my Special Envoy for Afghanistan. The activities of the Special Envoy were to be distinguished from those of UNSMA, the mandate of which was specifically defined by the General Assembly in resolution 51/195 B. I asked the Special Envoy to conduct a mission to consult the interested and relevant countries and parties, and then to submit to me his findings on their positions, as well as his recommendations, as part of a comprehensive review of United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan.

25. In New York, the Special Envoy met a number of permanent representatives to the United Nations, as well as representatives of various Afghan parties who were present. In early August, he visited Washington for extensive talks with senior officials of the State Department of the United States of America and the diplomats of various countries stationed in that city.

26. From 14 August to 23 September, the Special Envoy undertook a 13-nation tour of Afghanistan, France, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Uzbekistan

27. The Special Envoy visited three Afghan cities: Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamyan. In Kandahar, he met Mullah Jalil, Acting Taliban Foreign Minister; Mullah Mohammand Hassan, Deputy Head of the Taliban Supreme Shura in Kabul; and Mullah Mohammand Hassan, Governor of Kandahar. In Mazar-i-Sharif, he met General Abdul Malik, leader of NIMA; Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai, the newly appointed Prime Minister of the Northern Alliance; and representatives of the Jamiat-i-Islami, the Harakat-i-Islami, and the breakaway faction of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, led by Mr. Akbari. The Head of UNSMA, accompanied the Special Envoy to all of the meetings held in Afghanistan.

28. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Special Envoy was received with interest and warm hospitality. In all five of the six immediate neighbours of Afghanistan that he visited, he was received by their respective Heads of State as well as the Foreign Ministers. In the Russian Federation, the Special Envoy met Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Posuvaluk and other senior officials. He was received in Saudi Arabia by King Fahd, Crown Prince Abdullah and Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal, as well as by the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. In India, he was received by Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, Minister of State for External Affairs Shri Salim I. Shervani and other senior officials. In Japan, he was received by Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi. The Special Envoy met senior officials of the British and French Foreign Ministries in London and Paris, and he was received by former King Zahir Shah in Rome.

29. After his return to New York on 23 September, the Special Envoy continued consultations with representatives of the Afghan parties and the countries concerned, including the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, who were participating in the general debate of the General Assembly. On 30 September, he briefed the Security Council on his mission.

B. Meeting of States with influence in Afghanistan

30. On 1 October, I convened the third meeting of Member States with influence in Afghanistan in New York, using the formula that had been adopted for the meetings held on 18 November 1996 and 16 April 1997. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs chaired the meeting, in which the following member States participated: China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan. The Organization of the Islamic Conference also participated in the meeting. The Special Envoy and the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme briefed the meeting on their respective missions.

31. The delegations shared the view that the situation in Afghanistan remained volatile and carried serious implications for regional peace and stability. Many of them emphasized the importance of persistent efforts by the international community to achieve a political settlement which, they insisted, should not be given up just because conditions were difficult. The delegations expressed the belief that there could be no solution based on the dominance of any one ethnic group, and that there was a need for a broad-based government in Afghanistan that reflected the views of all segments of society. All delegations expressed full support for United Nations efforts in Afghanistan, in particular the peacemaking activities led by UNSMA. They were of the view that the United Nations should play the central role in peacemaking in Afghanistan, as a neutral and impartial mediator.

32. Many delegations stressed the need for more cooperation and coordination among Member States, in particular those in the region, in facilitating peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan. There was widespread agreement on the importance of addressing the question of foreign interference, especially the seemingly unabated supply of arms to the factions, as one of the key factors contributing to the continued fighting in Afghanistan.

33. The delegations emphasized that the Afghans needed to demonstrate a genuine political will to move towards national reconciliation. A number of suggestions were made in support of a direct dialogue between the warring parties. Several delegations offered specific venues for an intra-Afghan dialogue or for an international conference, including Bishkek and Tokyo.

34. Great concern was expressed by delegations about Afghanistan's contribution to the international drug trade and the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, not least the heavy burden placed upon neighbouring countries by the influx of refugees. Special attention was drawn to the serious human rights violations, in particular the treatment of girls and women. Many delegations spoke of the appalling cost of landmines in terms of human suffering and of the need to do more to clear them. There was a keen awareness among delegations of the need for the international community to be ready to help rebuild Afghanistan as soon as conditions permit. It was considered that United Nations peacemaking activities should be closely coordinated with its humanitarian relief and reconstruction activities.

35. Following the meeting, the Special Envoy and the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs convened a series of informal, small gatherings in New York involving representatives of the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan and other countries concerned. To date, there have been three meetings of a group of eight countries, comprising China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States of America and Uzbekistan. The purpose was to provide those countries with an opportunity to meet in small groups for a frank exchange of views on the external aspects of the Afghan question. The representatives discussed ways to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table and to curb the flow of arms into Afghanistan effectively and fairly.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

36. Afghanistan, which was once a flashpoint of super-Power rivalry, has since become a typical post-cold war regional and ethnic conflict, where the major Powers no longer see a strategic incentive to get involved. It has also become a place where even responsible local political authorities, let alone a central government, have virtually ceased to exist. Herein lies much of the explanation why repeated international attempts to bring peace to the country have not borne fruit.

37. Since the early 1990s, the Afghan factions and warlords have failed to show the will to rise above their narrow factional interests and to start working together for national reconciliation. The United Nations successfully mediated the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan in the late 1980s. But, although the Najibullah regime was ready to hand over power to a broad-based transition mechanism, the Mujahideen parties were unable to agree among themselves on how to form such a mechanism. Their disagreements escalated to the point where Kabul was plunged into chaos and bloodshed once the Najibullah regime collapsed in April 1992. Since that time, the situation has only become worse.

38. Even today, the Afghan parties seem determined to go on fighting, while outside Powers continue to provide material, financial and other support to their respective clients inside Afghanistan. Meanwhile, although those major Powers that have potential influence in Afghanistan have recently started to show interest, they have yet to demonstrate the necessary degree of determination to move the situation forward.

39. In these circumstances, it is illusory to think that peace can be achieved. How can peace be imposed on faction leaders who are determined to fight it out to the finish and who receive seemingly unlimited supplies of arms from outside sponsors? It is this continued support from some outside Powers - combined with the apathy of the others who are not directly involved - which has strengthened the belief among the warlords and parties in Afghanistan that they can achieve their political, religious and social goals by force.

Responsibility of the Afghans

40. The Afghans, perhaps, understandably, are reluctant to accept responsibility for the repeated failures to put an end to their conflict. Nevertheless, the Afghan people cannot just simply shift all responsibilities for the tragedy that has befallen their country onto others. Even if they receive help from outside, it is the Afghans themselves who are fighting one another. Peace will become possible when - and only when - they truly desire it and start to work seriously for it.

41. Much to my regret, the Afghan factions have so far failed to prove that they are willing to lay down their arms and cooperate with the United Nations for peace. To be sure, every side proclaims its readiness to work with the United Nations and accuses the other party or parties of bearing alone the responsibility for the continued fighting. However, at any given time there has always been at least one party that has thought it could achieve military

victory over its opponents and that, consequently, has rebuffed efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and only shown a willingness to compromise once the military situation has been reversed and it feels under threat. At the same time, there always exist spoilers inside and outside the country who are much better off with the continuation of the problem than they would be with the solution, a classic situation in failed States where warlords, smugglers, terrorists, drug dealers and others thrive amid the conflict and would only lose out with the return of peace, law and order.

Foreign interference

42. A similar situation prevails with the main foreign providers of support to the Afghan warring parties. They all enthusiastically proclaim their support to the United Nations peacemaking efforts but at the same time continue to fan the conflict by pouring in arms, money and other supplies to their preferred Afghan factions. These countries unanimously denounce "foreign interference", but are quick to add that arms are delivered only to "the other side".

43. These external players may have their own reasons for continuing to support their respective Afghan clients, but they must be held responsible for exacerbating the bloody conflict in Afghanistan. They must also be held accountable for building a fire which, they should be aware, is unlikely to remain indefinitely confined to Afghanistan. Indeed, that fire is already spreading beyond the borders of Afghanistan, posing a serious threat to the region and beyond in the shape of terrorism, banditry, narcotics trafficking, refugee flows, and increasing ethnic and sectarian tension.

44. The supply of arms and other materials from outside provides the essential wherewithal for the continued fighting in Afghanistan. It is apparent, in the light of the evidence collected so far, that large quantities of war-making materials are entering Afghanistan. It is hard to accept the argument that the Afghan warring factions are able to sustain the current level of fighting using only "those weapons and ammunition left by the Soviet troops". Neither is it credible that, with their limited financial capacity, those Afghan factions could afford to procure massive amounts of weapons on the black market and smuggle them into Afghanistan on their own.

International framework for settlement of the conflict

45. The unabated supply of arms, and the divergence of ways in which the countries concerned seem to be dealing with the conflict, lead me to believe that a solid international framework must be established in order to address the external aspects of the Afghan question. Such a framework would provide the neighbours of Afghanistan and other countries with an opportunity to discuss the question of foreign interference in a coherent manner. The main objective would be to debate how those countries could help the United Nations bring the Afghan parties to the negotiating table, including effective and fair ways to curb the flow of arms and other war-making materials into Afghanistan. Such countries should also find a way to speak unanimously by coordinating their individual peace initiatives through the United Nations. Only in this way would they send a message to the Afghans that the international community meant to achieve peace

in Afghanistan and that the warring factions could no longer count on outside support.

46. One of the ways to curb the flow of arms into Afghanistan would be the imposition of an effective arms embargo. Although such an embargo should not become an end in itself, it is necessary for the United Nations and Member States to undertake preliminary studies on how a mandatory arms embargo could be implemented in a fair and verifiable manner. If the cost estimates for such an embargo proved to be too high, other ways would need to be found to end, or at least significantly reduce, the supply of arms and other materials to the warring factions. One possibility would be for the countries concerned to take voluntary, unilateral but concerted actions by themselves to stop, to the degree possible, the supply of a designated list of goods to Afghanistan. This, of course, would also need to be done in a manner that did not provide advantage to any group.

47. The meetings held in New York of countries with influence in Afghanistan ("the Group of 21"), as well as those of the immediate neighbours and other countries ("the Group of Eight"), are part of my efforts in this direction. With the participation of my Special Envoy, I shall continue to convene informal meetings involving representatives of the neighbours of Afghanistan and other countries with influence in Afghanistan. The composition and the number of such groupings will remain flexible.

48. Furthermore, I am looking forward to attending the OIC summit, which will be held in Tehran from 9 to 11 December. I very much hope that OIC and its members will use this opportunity to adopt unanimously a strong decision in favour of peace in Afghanistan.

Intra-Afghan talks

49. Parallel to this, I intend to maintain through UNSMA and at United Nations Headquarters close contact with the warring parties, as well as with other influential Afghan individuals and organizations, with a view to preparing the ground for an intra-Afghan dialogue. Such a dialogue, if realized, should focus at first on a ceasefire, to be followed by political negotiations leading to the establishment of a broad-based representative government. It goes without saying that, for such a government to be acceptable, it should reflect the interests of all the major social, political and religious segments of the country. I take note in this context that several Member States have offered to host such a dialogue.

50. It is hoped that a ceasefire and the beginning of a dialogue - or even the mere prospects for one - would serve to create its own momentum and, after some time, make it difficult for anyone to resume fighting. It is also hoped that the ceasefire and talks would give a boost to the efforts of some Afghan groups and individuals to mobilize Afghan public opinion in favour of peace.

Activities of UNSMA

51. UNSMA will continue to play the primary role in conducting the United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. I believe that the current structure, composition and strength of UNSMA should be maintained for the time being. This does not exclude the possibility that, should a ceasefire and other measures be agreed, additional personnel might be required. Nor does it prejudge the issue referred to in paragraph 56 below.

52. The Special Mission will maintain its temporary headquarters in Islamabad, until conditions permit it to return to Kabul. Meanwhile, I intend to explore the possible opening of a small office in Turkmenistan in order to enhance the Special Mission's information-gathering and liaison capabilities, especially with those parties for whom the location of the Mission's temporary headquarters in Islamabad presents difficulties.

Conclusions

53. As described in the preceding sections of the present report, a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan remains elusive notwithstanding the untiring efforts of the United Nations to broker peace among the country's warring factions. In the meantime, Afghanistan's civil war has continued to exact a staggering toll in terms of human lives and suffering as well as material destruction. What we are witnessing is a seemingly endless tragedy of epic proportions in which the Afghan people's yearning for peace is being systematically and continually betrayed by leaders and warlords driven by selfish ambitions and thirst for power.

54. In earlier reports I have observed that the Afghan parties and their external supporters, while continuing to pursue military solutions, often also profess support for resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council calling for a peaceful settlement. Regrettably, their actions seldom seem to be motivated, however, by a desire to contribute to the implementation of those resolutions. Similarly, it is discouraging that with few exceptions, the international community as a whole has shown only limited interest in adopting tangible measures to discourage the Afghan parties and their outside supporters from pursuing their bellicose aims and objectives.

55. There is no doubt that a number of Governments both inside and outside the region would be in a favourable position, should they so decide, to encourage the Afghan parties to overcome their differences and seek a peaceful settlement. It is also clear, however, that as long as those Governments choose not to exercise their influence with the parties in a positive and constructive manner, the efforts made by my representatives, however dedicated and skilled, will not suffice to bring peace to Afghanistan. Sadly, it could be argued that in these circumstances the role of the United Nations in Afghanistan is little more than that of an alibi to provide cover for the inaction - or worse - of the international community at large.

56. Over the past several years, it has become increasingly difficult to justify the continuation of United Nations peace efforts and the attendant costs in the absence of any positive signs suggesting a fundamental change of attitude

on the part of those Governments that are capable of contributing decisively to a peaceful solution of the conflict. Recently, I have been somewhat encouraged, however, by the increased level of attention to the situation in Afghanistan now being manifested by a number of countries that have begun to discuss among themselves the adoption of practical measures to persuade the Afghan parties to embark on serious negotiations. But much more needs to be done by Governments with a greater sense of unity in order for the peace efforts spearheaded by the United Nations to stand a realistic chance of success.

57. I shall continue to keep the General Assembly and the Security Council informed about developments relevant to the search for a ceasefire and, ultimately, a negotiated solution in Afghanistan, including any actions taken by Member States with a bearing on the situation, whether positive or negative. In conclusion, I should like to express my special thanks to Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, whose findings and suggestions form the basis for the present report, as well as to Mr. Norbert Holl, the Head of UNSMA, and his staff who continue to carry out their difficult tasks with the highest degree of dedication and professionalism.